DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 897 EA 028 962

AUTHOR	Lashway, Larry
TITLE	Creating a Learning Organization. ERIC Digest, Number 121.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, OR.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-EA-98-5
PUB DATE	1998-04-00
NOTE	3p.
CONTRACT	RR93002006
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5207.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Change Strategies; Educational Environment; Educational Innovation; Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Development; *Lifelong Learning; Organizational Objectives; *Professional Development; *Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; *Learning Communities; *Learning Organizations

ABSTRACT

According to some theorists, schools that dedicate themselves to systematic, collaborative problem-solving can continually develop and implement new ideas -- becoming what is called learning organizations. Ways in which schools accomplish this transformation are discussed. Although many researchers have failed to find schools that actually become learning organizations, some investigators have begun to identify schools in which entire faculties have gained proficiency in new forms of instruction. The research has shown how schools that focused on several models of teaching, using a strong research base that included cooperative learning, concept-attainment, and synectics, were able to elevate staff learning, motivated in part by data that reveal their level of success or failure. Some studies have also pointed to changes in the workplace as a key to successful organizational learning, documenting the importance of schools providing time for teachers to reflect together. But most important is the degree to which principals and superintendents can envision themselves as "learning leaders," thereby allowing learning to become a collaborative, goal-oriented task and their organizations to be viewed as learning communities, for faculty as well as for students. (RJM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 420 897

ERIC DIGEST

APRIL 1998 NUMBER 121 EDO-EA-98-5

Creating a Learning Organization

By Larry Lashway

School leaders in a whimsical mood sometimes play a parlor game called "Spot That Jargon," in which the goal is to name as many past educational fads as possible. The list is usually impressive: dozens of would-be reforms that were introduced with great fanfare and then quickly faded away.

The game is played with tongue in cheek, but it often stirs some sad reflections. Why are schools so susceptible to enthusiastic but short-lived fads? What makes it so difficult to turn a promising idea into a lasting contribution?

Such questions have recently sparked interest in yet another new idea: "the learning organization." According to some theorists, schools that dedicate themselves to systematic, collaborative problem-solving can *continually* develop and implement new ideas, thereby not just improving but transforming themselves. Does research support this optimistic view? Or will the learning organization, five years from now, be just another entry on the jargon list?

Can Schools Be Learning Organizations?

Kenneth Leithwood and colleagues (1995) define a *learning organization* as:

> a group of people pursuing common purposes (individual purposes as well) with a collective commitment to regularly weighing the value of those purposes, modifying them when that makes sense, and continuously developing more effective and efficient ways of accomplishing those purposes.

Although this is an inspiring vision, schools may be far from achieving it. Teacher isolation, lack of time, and the complexity of teaching present significant barriers to sustained organizational learning (Larry Lashway 1997).

Not surprisingly, researchers have often found that substantive changes in teaching practices are elusive. Richard Elmore and colleagues (1996) discovered that even when teachers were willing to learn new methods, they often applied them in a superficial or inconsistent way, offering the appearance but not the substance of real change.

Moreover, while rhetoric on learning organizations is plentiful, thoughtful research is harder to find. Summing up their study of the literature, Leithwood and colleagues noted that "we have almost no systematic evidence describing the conditions which foster and inhibit such learning."

Despite this vein of pessimism, other researchers have begun to identify schools in which entire faculties have become proficient in new forms of instruction, resulting in immediate impact on student learning and behavior. The remainder of this *Digest* highlights several key findings from this work.

How Can Staff Learning Be Focused?

Educational reforms are often undertaken in a rushed atmosphere, with a dozen different initiatives going on simultaneously. Training may consist of a one-day workshop, with little provision for practice and feedback.

Beverly Showers, Carlene Murphy, and Bruce Joyce (1996) studied three schools that undertook a systematic, sustained reform that focused on several models of teaching with a strong research base, including cooperative learning, concept-attainment, and synectics. These models were designed to supplement teachers' existing strategies, not replace them.

The models were taught in three steps to all teachers. The first phase was designed to give teachers a theoretical understanding of the new concepts. This was followed by multiple demonstrations (mainly videotapes of classroom instruction) and opportunities to practice the new skills in the workshop setting.

Showers and colleagues note that this intensive workshop model is sufficient for teachers to introduce new strategies in their classrooms, but without additional support fewer than 10 percent will persist long enough to integrate the new skills into their repertoire. They maintain that proficiency requires twenty to thirty trials under classroom conditions. Thus they encouraged teachers to use the new methods immediately and frequently, and to organize themselves into study teams for sharing, observation, and peer coaching.

The results were notable. At the end of the first year, 88 percent of the teachers were using the new strategies regularly and effectively. In one middle school, promotion rates soared, while the average achievement test score jumped from the twenty-fifth to the forty-second percentile. In addition, disciplinary referrals dropped to about one-fifth the previous level.

How Is Learning Driven by Data?

Bruce Joyce and Emily Calhoun (1996) note that schools are "both information-rich and information-impoverished." School personnel collect a prodigious amount of information, from test scores to attendance figures, yet rarely link this wealth of data to school-improvement efforts.

Joyce and Calhoun cite the case

CLEARINGHOUSE ON EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT • UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

EA 028 962

of a middle school in which only 30 percent of the students earned promotion at the end of each year. Although these figures were known for years to everyone in the school, the faculty had never met to reflect on the failure rate or study the causes. When a staff development program finally focused attention on the figures, the situation began to change. Within two years, 95 percent of the students were being promoted.

Focusing on data confronts staff with hard evidence that may challenge existing perceptions of success; discrepancies raise sharp questions about what is happening and why. In addition, monitoring data provides a good way of tracking the effects of change efforts. Joyce and Calhoun point out that this is especially important in convincing faculty that students can achieve more than they thought possible. Finally, study of data often leads to a desire for more information. As reform efforts proceed, the school generates increasingly sophisticated data and uses it in a meaningful way.

What Changes in the Workplace Support Organizational Learning?

Some studies point to changes in the workplace as a key to successful organizational learning.

First, schedules and assignments should allow time for collective inquiry. Joyce and Calhoun argue that significant reform is "nearly impossible" in a typical school workplace; at best, people will move forward as individual "points of light," but they will be unable to form a learning community.

Thus, schools must provide time for teachers to work and reflect together. Some schools, using early dismissal one afternoon a week, have been able to clear out significant blocks of time. In addition, Sharon Kruse and Karen Louis (1993) point out the importance of well-developed communication structures such as email and regular faculty meetings, as well as a common space for working.

Collective inquiry may be strengthened by more democratic forms of governance. Joyce and Calhoun advocate the formation of "Responsible Parties" to lead the school community in improvement efforts. These groups, composed of administrators, teachers, parents, and community members, would not be traditional parliamentary decision-making groups, but would act as champions for extended inquiry.

Guiding such diverse groups (whose members may have differing agendas and little experience working together) is especially challenging for leaders. Laura Lipton and Robert Melamede (1997) suggest that the key to successful group dynamics is dialogue rather than debate, with the emphasis on listening, suspending judgment, and seeking common understanding. In successful dialogue, participants learn not to march directly toward the nearest solution but to examine assumptions and share multiple perspectives that open the way to new types of collective learning.

Finally, new strategies appear to be best learned in small groups that provide motivation, support, sympathetic sounding boards, and technical assistance (Joyce and Calhoun).

What Is the Leader's Role?

Creating a learning organization requires a deep rethinking of the leader's role. Principals and superintendents must see themselves as "learning leaders" responsible for helping schools develop the capacity to carry out their mission. A crucial part of this role is cultivating and maintaining a shared vision (Lashway, Leithwood and colleagues, Lipton and Melamede). The vision provides focus, generating questions that apply to everyone in the organization. Learning becomes a collaborative, goal-oriented task rather than a generalized desire to "stay current."

At a more mundane level, leaders must tend to the organizational structures that support continuous learning, squeezing time out of a busy schedule, collecting and disseminating information that accurately tracks the school's performance, and creating forms of governance that support collective inquiry.

Perhaps most important, leaders must view their organizations as learning communities, for faculty as well as students. This requires casting school improvement in terms of hypotheses to be tested rather than solutions to be handed out, attacking the barriers to collaboration, and making decisions democratically rather than bureaucratically (Joyce and Calhoun). When the spirit of inquiry permeates the daily routine, schools are on their way to becoming true learning organizations.

RESOURCES

Elmore, Richard F.; Penelope L. Peterson; and Sarah J. McCarthey. *Restructuring in the Classroom: Teaching, Learning, and School Organization*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

Joyce, Bruce, and Emily Calhoun. "School Renewal: An Inquiry, Not a Prescription." In *Learning Experiences in School Renewal: An Exploration of Five Successful Programs*, edited by Bruce Joyce and Emily Calhoun. 175-90. Eugene, Oregon: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1996. 219 pages. ED 401 600.

Kruse, Sharon D., and Karen Seashore Louis. "An Emerging Framework for Analyzing School-Based Professional Community." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta Georgia, April 1993. 31 pages. ED 358 537.

Lashway, Larry. *Leading With Vision*. Eugene, Oregon: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1997. 148 pages.

Leithwood, Kenneth; Doris Jantzi; and Rosanne Steinbach. "An Organizational Learning Perspective on School Responses to Central Policy Initiatives." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 1995. 38 pages. ED 385 932.

Lipton, Laura, and Robert Melamede. "Organizational Learning: The Essential Journey." In *The Process-Centered School: Sustaining a Renaissance Community*, edited by Arthur L. Costa and Rosemarie M. Liebmann. 30-53. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, 1997. 260 pages. ED 407 721.

Showers, Beverly; Carlene Murphy, and Bruce Joyce. "The River City Program: Staff Development Becomes School Improvement." In *Learning Experiences in School Renewal: An Exploration of Five Successful Programs*, edited by Bruce Joyce and Emily Calhoun. 13-51. Eugene, Oregon: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1996. 219 pages. ED 401 600.

A Product of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management • 5207 University of Oregon • Eugene, Oregon 97403-5207

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract No. OERI RR93002006. The ideas and opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, ED, or the Clearinghouse. This Digest is in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. EA 028 962.